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Test Driving the iPad2 – Can it Replace the Laptop?

The question many of us ask ourselves when a new gadget launches is: "Do I really have a use for it?" Every new device comes with the usual marketing hype; the promise that it will change our lives - but will it?

I managed to fight temptation when the first iPad launched, but when my information technology director asked me to test drive an iPad2 to see if providing iPads to everyone at the firm was wise, I decided to take the plunge. I had seen the marketing material for the iPad2, but decided to look at it from a different point of view: How can I use this device to make my life easier and be more productive in a law firm environment?

In many ways the iPad2 resembles the iPhone4 in functionality. If you are already an iPhone user then the transition to using the iPad is a walk in the park. In fact, the iPad2 is superior to the iPhone in so many ways that you'll find yourself leaving your phone behind, and instead turning to your iPad for portable communication and web browsing.

I don't know about you, but I seem to have access to a wireless connection everywhere I go. If you fall into this category, when you purchase your iPad2, don't bother entering into an expensive monthly agreement for online access. I do have a monthly plan, but nearly always connect to the local wireless connection, as it is much faster and responsive. The office, home, local coffee shop and even friends' houses have wireless that you can connect to. If you have a smart phone, you likely can also create a local hub (personal hotspot) from which you can run your iPad2.

As you start using the iPad2, the first thing you will notice is the much larger touch keyboard. This removes the frustration that many people suffer with smaller phone touch screens – especially if you use the extended keyboard setting (found in the system set-ups section). I am currently typing this article on my iPad2 while at LAX waiting to board a plane, and am having no problems whatsoever with accuracy or functionality. If I am typing a really long document, however, I find that a regular keyboard works better.

In fact, if you purchase the iPad2 camera connection kit, you can plug a regular keyboard directly into your iPad using the standard USB connector (please note that when you plug in a keyboard using this method, the iPad2 will display a message that it does not recognize this device, but will work perfectly anyway). I have also realized that most places have a keyboard available for you to use. I find the regular full-size keyboards much easier to use than the blue tooth models I have tried, so I am really happy with this alternative.

When purchasing an iPad2, don't forget to pick up a protective case. I recommend this as one of your first purchases.

The next question is: What software should you load or purchase? Most of the applications I use daily on my PC are not available to use directly on the iPad2, but some of them do provide file-type compatibility. For example, if you use Pages on the iPad2 for word processing, you can export your work in Microsoft Word format or as a PDF document, which can then be moved to your PC. You can also start Word documents on your PC, then open them in Pages on the iPad2 to continue working on them. The only issue I have found is that Pages does not have all of the fonts that Microsoft Word has, so fonts may be converted. If you plan on working back and forth between your PC and your iPad2, I recommend using a standard font, such as Times New Roman.

If you want to use, on your iPad2, software applications that you use on your PC, you can do that by connecting directly to your PC via the Internet. If you use the correct software, you can open your PC desktop on your iPad2, and work as if you are using your PC. There are a number of software options that help you do this, but the one I like is TeamViewer, as it is simple to load, connect and use. The price may seem high compared with other iPad2 applications, but remember that this application allows you to use all of the software you already have on your PC, including document management systems and connection to your network.

There are literally thousands of application options for the iPad2, and after trying various combinations, here are my current favorites:

Word processing – Pages; spreadsheet – Numbers; slides and presentations – Photo Slideshow Director; notes – Notes (iOS5); reminders – Reminders (iOS5); file saving and transfer – FileMagnet; sketching – Penultimate; connection to my PC – TeamViewer; email – iPad email application that connects to all my email accounts including Outlook Exchange; and expenses – Concur.

If you already have an iPad2, but do not have the latest operating system, I recommend that you immediately load the free upgrades to iOS5, which include more than 200 new features for your iPad, iPhone or iPod Touch. For me, two key new features are iMessage and the Notification Center. iMessage allows you to send and receive unlimited text messages via Wi-Fi or 3G from your iPad, iPhone or iPad Touch to others who also use those devices with iOS5. The Notification Center provides, all in one place, alerts for the services you specify.

If you read my earlier article where I reviewed the iPhone4, you will be delighted to hear that the list of tips and guidelines provided in that article also work for the iPad2. Here is one more tip that works for both devices: You can take a screen shot of anything you are viewing by simultaneously holding down the power button on the top and the bottom button on the front of the surround.

The biggest plus for me in using the iPad2 is the portability and flexibility of the device. In meetings, it can be used to pass examples and presentations around the room, but it is also easy to connect the iPad2

to both large TV screens and projectors. My field, business development, is all about communication, and this tool is lightyears ahead of my laptop in terms of assisting me with my work.

Everyone knows the iPad2 has many uses outside of work, but you may not know that if you purchase the Apple connection kit to link your iPad2 to your TV, and also link to your wireless network, you are able to convert your flat screen TV into a multimedia center. The world of entertainment provided by sites like Netflix can then be opened on your iPad2, and viewed on your TV.

On the downside, if you are looking to replace your laptop with the iPad2, in my opinion it is not yet time to do so. The software to connect to your PC via the Internet works well, but is slower than if you were actually using your laptop. The iPad2 also has a few missing features such as the amount of built-in memory to store documents, the ability to run applications such as Microsoft on the tablet, and the ability to choose a Web browser (Safari is the only choice on the iPad2, and quite a few websites and services are not compatible with it).

I also miss the ease of using a flash drive to transfer files and view documents, as well as the ability to plug in an ethernet cable to connect to the Internet (so many hotels still have problems with wireless systems, and the ability to plug in a direct connection would be a huge bonus).

In conclusion, the iPad2 provides mobility that is ideal in a business development environment. I am sure I will discover more benefits as I continue to use it, and am interested to see what the next version of the iPad brings. For now, my recommendation for attorneys, as they are heavily dependent on document management systems, networks and a range of legal applications, is that the iPad2 is a useful addition – but not yet a replacement for the laptop.

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